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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002075

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: OPPOSITION SCRAMBLING TO MOUNT NOVEMBER 7  
PROTEST

REF: A. A. TBILISI 02052

[B. B. TBILISI 1987](#)

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. KENT LOGSDON REASONS: 1.4 (B) A  
ND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On November 6, the United Opposition held a briefing for the Diplomatic Corps to discuss their plans for a political protest to begin at 2pm, November 7. The protest will commence in front of Parliament and then may proceed to the Presidential Palace, if it attracts enough participants. The briefing was chaired by former Presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze who was flanked by Kakha Kukhava (Conservative Party), Koba Davitashvili (People's Party), Nestan Kirtadze (Labor Party), and Eka Beselia (Movement for United Georgia Party). Gachechiladze outlined a set of demands the opposition had prepared for President Saakashvili -- the United Opposition demands that Imedi TV be returned to its rightful owners by November 22; more access to public television for opposition leaders; freedom for political prisoners (about 60 people according to the opposition); new Parliamentary and Presidential elections slated for April. The participants stressed that they intended to have a peaceful protest but demurred when asked specific questions about the number of participants; how long the protest would last; and what their plan of action would be if the turnout was paltry. The participants were often combative when asked specific questions about their aims and intent. Nino Burjanadze, Davit Usupashvili (Republicans), and David Gamkrelidze (New Rights) were notably absent. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: The opposition seems to have no clear plan for its rally on November 7. Major opposition figures Burjanadze, Usupashvili, and Gamkrelidze have distanced themselves from the protest, fearing a political debacle and public backlash. All seem to be wary of the direction the opposition is heading and are trying to carve out an identity distinct from the increasingly unpopular umbrella United Opposition group. In spite of their doubts, all are watching closely as to how the protest progresses; clearly hoping to jump on the bandwagon if the protests draw large crowds and interest. The organizers of the rally, headed by Gachechiladze, seem oblivious to public polls showing little appetite for large scale protests and fears of instability. Seemingly devoid of a long term strategy to achieve their aims, the organizers are focusing on short term tactics which could produce a significant political backlash to the opposition's hopes of increasing its popularity in a Georgia weary of instability and upheaval. Meanwhile, senior Government officials, most recently Interior Minister Merabishvili, continue to assure us that they are not expecting trouble and will take a patient and cautious approach to dealing with the demonstration, with the goal of avoiding any violence. Post plans to observe the rally and will issue a warden notice to caution private Americans to avoid downtown the afternoon of November 7. End Comment.

Opposition's New Plan - Same as the Old Plan

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13. (C) Gachechiladze outlined his view that Georgia desperately needs political and electoral reforms. His demands for more media freedom, new elections, and release of political prisoner are largely the same list as previous iterations. (Embassy Note: It is unclear who these political prisoners are. The opposition estimates vary widely but their inability or refusal to provide us a list does not lend credence to their claims. End Note.) The Qdoes not lend credence to their claims. End Note.) The tactics also remain the same - stage large-scale protests and hope President Saakashvili will comply with their demands. Gachechiladze said the protests would be peaceful but then, offhandedly, said he had good information that authorities planned provocations in response. No specifics followed, nor did Gachechiladze address President Saakashvili's public comments that he has instructed police units to be tolerant and non-reactive. In separate conversations (reftel A) and subsequent private discussions, government officials have committed to allow the protests to be conducted peacefully.

13. (C) When pressed by poloff as to what the opposition response would be if their demands are not met, the members said they would stage more protests. Poloff asked the leaders if constant protesting might diminish their support and weaken their cause rather than advance it. Gachechiladze avoided the question, but rather directed a tirade about a recent IRI poll (ref B) to the IRI representative who was present. He stated that the polling data showing little support for protests is false, corrupted, and out of touch with Georgian public opinion. Gachechiladze offered no support for his position that public opinion supported large scale protests or the larger opposition agenda. Gachechiladze added that if Saakashvili did not comply, he

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would form a new opposition party before the 15th of December. Pressed for specifics, Gachichiladze said he could not divulge the makeup or agenda of this new opposition party.

14. (C) Other diplomats followed up with specific questions about expected turnout, goals, and questions on tactics. None of the opposition wanted to venture a guess about turnout other than it would be "large". When asked what would happen if it were not large, Gachechiladze shrugged his shoulders. The repeated skeptical questions prompted Koba Davitashvili (People's Party) to intervene and state his opinion that Saakashvili only survived last November due to U.S. political support. He congratulated poloff on the new President-elect and hoped that "he would support democracy and freedoms."

It's Not the Message, It's Government Oppression  
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15. (C) Answering a question as to whether the opposition was organizing other concurrent protests; Gachechiladze said protests were only slated for Tbilisi, echoing an oft repeated theme that denial of access to media outlets is the main reason the opposition has been faltering. Other opposition members concurred and said that protests were the only way to get their message out to an information-starved public. All seemed unaware of the possibility that their message simply did not resonate with the larger Georgian public, or was at times incoherent. Gachechiladze seemed puzzled when asked how this disparate group would govern if it won new elections or, in the alternative, entered a new parliament as opposition. He somewhat oddly stated that they needed to cross that bridge when they came to it. He then opined that if elected into parliament, the groups would go their own way, pursuing their own agendas. None of the other participants appeared to have considered this crucial question that the public will certainly ask if new elections were called.

Where is the Rest of the Opposition?  
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16. (C) Unstated but noticeably absent from the briefing were Nino Burjanadze, Davit Gamkrelidze, and Davit Usupashvili. Only Usupashvili made a statement saying that the Republican party is "not an organizer or an initiator of the rally". Usupashvili confirmed that he had been in contact with opposition colleagues, but no joint plan had been put forth. Local news reports that some opposition politicians have acknowledged that parties were divided on tactics. Privately, they told us they have concerns about the rally and its organization (ref A). Although Gamkrelidze and Usupashvili told us that they plan to participate (although they are not taking any responsibility for the rally's organization), it remains an open question as to whether these notable opposition figures will participate, and if so, in what capacity.

LOGSDON